

# What We Imagine Knowledge to Be

## Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Seventy Years of American Studies

 Philip McGowan

### Abstract

This essay looks back to 1947, the year that the Salzburg seminar was inaugurated, as well as looking at contemporary issues in American studies to chart where we have come from to date and where the field is heading. Its main argument examines the poems “Esthétique du Mal” by Wallace Stevens from his 1947 collection *Transport to Summer* and “At the Fishhouses” by Elizabeth Bishop, first published in 1947, and explores common themes of knowledge, pain, loss, and history. As the Western world experiences again a moment of political and cultural uncertainty brought to the center stage of US and European discourse in 2016 by the election of Donald Trump and the UK vote to leave the European Union, Stevens and Bishop offer routes forward through such moments of heightened politicization. American studies, as a field of interconnected disciplines, continually confronts the difficult aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century life. As the rise of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements have indicated, the open ruptures within American society will continue to pour forth debates requiring urgent critical attention and discussion. Incidents of racial hatred, of right-wing extremism, and of abusive misogynistic sexism, dormant to varying degrees prior to Trump’s election, have come to the surface of a nation increasingly riven by what the reality of his Presidency means for America. Our job, as researchers and teachers, is to engage each and every aspect of this moment in history, however contested or controversial they may be.

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# What We Imagine Knowledge to Be

## Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Seventy Years of American Studies

Philip McGowan

Taking its title from a line in Elizabeth Bishop's 1947 poem "At the Fishhouses," the narrative of which details a trip back to the Nova Scotian environments of her childhood, this article (re-)establishes imagination and knowledge as two modes of response to a fractured or uncertain world. At the opening of the 2017 Austrian Association for American Studies conference, Ralph Poole's keynote "Huck Finn at King Arthur's Court: F. O. Matthiessen, the Salzburg Seminar, and American Studies" offered an agile and intricate reading of F. O. Matthiessen, Henry James, and the figurative and actual ghosts that were circulating both in post-World War II Salzburg and also in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).<sup>1</sup> What Poole so cogently developed permits this discussion to build on a number of shared themes: in particular, questions of suffering, innocence, and experience are uppermost in my mind. Recall the conversation in *The Portrait of a Lady* between Isabel Archer and Ralph Touchett concerning the failure of ghosts to appear to innocents such as Isabel herself. Using 1947 as the temporal point of significance (because it was the year of the first Salzburg Seminar), what follows examines how two American poems negotiate the themes of suffering, innocence, and experience during and immediately after the war in Europe. Both poems are written by American poets firmly ensconced within the United States. The first, "Esthétique du Mal" by Wallace Stevens, was written and published in 1944. One of Stevens's "greater poems of the Second World War,"<sup>2</sup> its fifteen cantos reveal an "openly apocalyptic" Stevens,<sup>3</sup> and are a key moment in his 1947 collection *Transport to Summer*. The second poem, Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," first published in *The New Yorker* on August 9, 1947, although not immediately concerned with the events of the recent war, is a work that offers resolution after rupture from a writer well versed in personal and familial dislocation.

Following Poole's identification of Matthiessen's own issues with dislocation,



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identity and belonging, I want to connect my readings of these Stevens and Bishop poems back to Matthiessen and the project of American studies that he helped inaugurate here in Salzburg in the summer of 1947. Such a backward glance over traveled roads allows a self-reflexive consideration of the state of the field of our interests today: by tallying where we have come from previously, particularly out of the immediate shadows of World War II, we can begin to speculate where American studies might be headed at this point nineteen years into the twenty-first century. The myriad fields that now constitute American studies have expanded beyond all recognition when compared to 1947, and the continual redefinition of the territories of American studies is central to what maintains its relevance as an academic discipline. Our field is the cultural barometer of contemporary events and phenomena that are insistently transnational as well as being multiply transformative. That said, the close of 2017 brought with it ominous echoes and historical reminders of that earlier time period, seventy years previously, out of which Europe, led by interventionist US initiatives in foreign and educational policy, was taking preliminary steps after World War II.

As a field of academic inquiry, American studies occupies and negotiates numerous sites of contention and rupture. It has been, and must remain, at the forefront of discussions of gender, race, and identity politics. It must continue to investigate the transgressive as insistently as it does the transnational, to argue for space and recognition for transgender people just as it voices the transhistorical, and reverberating, concerns produced by the American project. American studies, for me, continually interprets what it is that we imagine knowledge to be: American studies questions, qualifies, and layers received interpretations with new nodes of evaluation and new identities requiring fair and equal representation. That said, and speaking from my own central interest in American poetry, American studies is a broad enough school that is capable of retaining individual disciplinary focus when needed and of applying such scholarly insights to the questions that confront contemporary scholars and citizens. It is for this reason that I turn to the work of two established American poets to speak about then and now and to return the value and vitality of poetry and poetry criticism to the heart of European negotiations of the United States. Bishop's work in particular is filled with questions of transnationalism and transgression, her art the slow distillation of answers to questions that we still seek to resolve. To take just one example: the title poem of her 1965 collection *Questions of Travel* closes

*"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?  
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right  
about just sitting quietly in one's room?"*

*Continent, city, country, society:  
the choice is never wide and never free.  
And here, or there No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?*<sup>4</sup>

One primary mode of Bishop's writing is that of resistance: to received wisdom, to conditioned behaviors, to poetry's own articulations of "imaginary gardens" as Marianne Moore might have represented a similar point.<sup>5</sup> In "Questions of Travel," first published in *The New Yorker* on January 21, 1956, Bishop interrogates the meaning of place, what one understands as "home" or defines as belonging, set against the background of her own life by this time relocated from North America to Brazil. Matthiessen, dead almost six years before Bishop's poem was first published, might well have asked such questions about his own imagined places (indeed, this very place, Salzburg, in 1947)—about belonging, and home, and choices that are never wide nor free.

Three months before delivering the inaugural Salzburg seminar lecture, F. O. Matthiessen reviewed Wallace Stevens's *Transport to Summer*, the volume that contains "Esthétique du Mal," for *The New York Times*. This was Stevens's fifth poetry collection, or sixth if the 1931 expanded reissue of *Harmonium* constitutes a separate volume. Matthiessen's review, published on April 20, 1947, reveals some of the concerns that were pre-occupying his mind in the lead-up to his Salzburg address. Reading it again today provides a working background against which the threads of this essay will begin to take form. A number of issues happily coalesce for the purposes of this analysis: Matthiessen reviewing Stevens's latest collection; the fact that Matthiessen then comes to Salzburg in the summer of 1947; and the summer publication of Bishop's "At the Fishhouses." Examining "Esthétique du Mal" and "At the Fishhouses" together may seem to be a somewhat arbitrary partnership, but it should be noted that Bishop's initial explorations in poetry were influenced in no small measure by the work of Stevens: "I think that Wallace Stevens was the poet who most affected my writing then," Bishop observed in a 1966 interview with Ashley Brown when discussing her early writing as a student at Vassar College.<sup>6</sup>

Taking these two poets, and these two specific poems, as the central coordinates for this argument's reflection on our current moment, I want to consider where American studies (however we might define this multivalent, flexible academic territory) might be headed in this age of political rupture on both sides of the Atlantic. So much has changed, and mainly for the better, in the seventy years that have passed since the first Salzburg seminar; and yet so much appears in flux once more, no matter where we might turn to look: the regional uncertainty in Catalunya in the autumn of 2017, for instance; or the lead-up to, and actual moment and outcome of, the 2018 mid-terms in the United States (what forms of fake news will attempt to



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occupy both the headlines and the electorate, distracting from what might actually be going on in America's political system between now and the 2020 Presidential election campaign); tensions on the Korean peninsula in 2017 have made the specter of a cataclysmic nuclear confrontation depressingly real once again all of a sudden; allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election has, since May 2017, seen the establishment of the Mueller Special Counsel investigation into the election campaign; and the European project of integration, that has assured peace across continental Europe since the end of WWII, is again on the negotiating table due to the UK's open wound, its decision to leave the European Union following its June 23, 2016, referendum. In this (hopefully short) "post-truth" era, Bishop's delin-eation of what we imagine knowledge to be serves as a necessary and also rejuve-native counter-balance to a western world apparently keen on undoing the advan-tages it has accrued since 1945, seemingly devoid once again of rational thought processes and simultaneously blind to historical perspective.

First, to Matthiessen and his review of Stevens. Having noted the "full-bodied" nature of Stevens's *Transport to Summer* poems and how the poet was, like the later Yeats, turning more to examine "the imagination itself," Matthiessen concludes his *New York Times* review of Stevens's latest collection by noting:

All of Stevens' later work has been written against the realization that we live in a time of violent disorder. The most profound challenge in his poems is his confidence that even in such a time, even on the verge of ruin, a man can rec-reate afresh his world out of the unfailing utilization of his inner resources. The value of the creative imagination, of "supreme fictions" in their fullest abun-dance, lies in the extension, even to the point of grandeur, that they add to our common lives. I suppose that Wallace Stevens, in expressing such truths with the mellowness and tang of a late-summer wine, has about one reader to every hundred of the latest best-seller. Yet Stevens, who did not publish a poem until he was 35, will increasingly be recognized to belong in the company of Henry Adams and Henry James, with that small body of important American artists who have ripened as they matured, and who have been far more productive beyond their middle years than during their green twenties or thirties.<sup>7</sup>

Matthiessen's prediction that Stevens would come to hold a prominent place in the American literary canon was certainly well-judged. However, here, I'm more interested in his tethering of Stevens's work to the contemporary moment of WWII, an issue of immediate importance to Matthiessen's lecture at Salzburg in July 1947, in which he emphasized that

[o]ur age has had no escape from an awareness of history. Much of that history has been hard and full of suffering. But now we have the luxury of an histor-ical awareness of another sort, of an occasion not of anxiety but of promise.

We may speak without exaggeration of this occasion as historic, since we have come here to enact anew the chief function of culture and humanism, to bring man again into communication with man.<sup>8</sup>

Matthiessen's pinpointing of historical awareness is key and guides what I want to do with these poems by Stevens and Bishop. Writing to Leonard C. van Geyzel in September 1939, Stevens admits his response to the start of the war in Europe as being "a horror of it: a horror of the fact that such a thing could occur."<sup>9</sup> In a follow-up letter to van Geyzel from January of 1940 Stevens references "the more or less universal disaster" of the war,<sup>10</sup> and in a series of letters as the war progresses, Stevens makes clear the heightened reality of the events and the effect of these on his mind. In August of 1940, writing to Henry Church, to whom Stevens dedicated "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), Stevens reveals two recent family tragedies—"My only brother died a month or two ago, and last week my wife's mother was killed in an automobile accident"—which, added to the wider "demnition news" and the "demnition grind at the office . . . makes me feel pretty much as a man must feel in a shelter waiting for the bombing to start." His overall take on current affairs is that "the climate is changing, and it seems pretty clearly to be becoming less and less a climate of literature."<sup>11</sup>

Confirming Matthiessen's observation that "Stevens' later work has been written against the realization that we live in a time of violent disorder,"<sup>12</sup> the collection before *Transport to Summer, Parts of a World* (1942) had concluded with two notable discussions of war and aesthetic responses to it, the poem "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" and what Charles Berger has termed a "curious prose coda" which opens, "The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things."<sup>13</sup> In the latter, Stevens argues that "[i]n the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact."<sup>14</sup> The tussle with reality, with facts as they are, is one aspect of Stevens's "poetry of a work of the imagination"; during warfare, the excess of real facts overpowers the imagination. Poetry, as a consequence, inevitably provides an altered response to things as they are. As Simon Critchley delineates it, "in the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination": war is the enactment of what Stevens would later refer to as "A new knowledge of reality" in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," the poem that closes *The Rock* (1954).<sup>15</sup> War is not simply an imagining of what such a knowledge might be but its realization in the present moment.

By the time he sends "Esthétique du Mal" to *Kenyon Review* editor John Crowe Ransom, on July 28, 1944, Stevens notes in his accompanying letter that the poem's "title is not quite right in the sense that anything of that sort seems to be not quite

right now-a-days” and that the aesthetics he refers to is “the equivalent of aperçus, which seems to have been the original meaning.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, elsewhere, Stevens confessed to feeling equivocal about aspects of the poem. Writing to Church in August 1944, he admits “[e]very now and then as I walk along the street I think of something that I said in the course of it that I wish I hadn’t said, but it doesn’t matter.”<sup>17</sup> The overall trajectory of *Transport to Summer*—and recall Stevens is aged sixty-seven at the time of its release—is one that maps a writer looking for elements beyond the immediate war and post-war environments to facilitate a piecing (back) together of a more benign worldview. Not that Stevens had avoided warfare as a subject in his poetry prior to WWII: his first poems emerge in 1914 and, as Rachel Galvin notes, an early work like “Phases,” published in *Poetry* in May 1914, developed a “trope of music” that would be “crucial to all his subsequent war poems.”<sup>18</sup> Later poems such as “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz” (1935) continue Stevens’s employment of music as a martial metaphor and prefigure the “unbelievable catastrophe” that would envelop Europe after September 1939: the “sudden mobs of men” of that poem “crying without knowing for what” form part of an “epic of disbelief” that “will soon be constant.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, Charles Berger delineates “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “The Men That Are Falling,” both contained in *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), as examples of Stevens as “a civilian witness to war—not a direct sufferer of its horrors—who, while acknowledging the ethical distance between himself and the immediate victims of war, nonetheless regards it as the duty of the modern secular poet to fashion a response to what he witnesses, even from a distance.”<sup>20</sup>

Stevens’s search for an accommodation with contemporary reality during wartime might readily be discerned from the title of the opening poem of *Transport to Summer*, “God is Good. It is a Beautiful Night,” or from the knowledge of the next poem, “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” that now “It is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back.”<sup>21</sup> Thirteen poems further along in the collection, “Holiday in Reality” argues that “Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring. / Spring is the truth of spring or nothing, a waste, a fake.”<sup>22</sup> Each of these three poems was first published during America’s involvement in the war: “Certain Phenomena of Sound” in *Poetry* in October 1942; “God is Good. It is a Beautiful Night” in the December 1942 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*; and “Holiday in Reality” in the summer 1944 edition of *Chimera*. With the war over, the ten-section “Credences of Summer,” completed in July 1946, anchors a shift toward positivity after brutality that characterizes a lot, though not all, of the collection: with “all fools slaughtered” and summer roses full “with a weight / Of fragrance,” an environment in which “the mind lays by its trouble” is possible once more.<sup>23</sup> Berger for one notes “Credences of Summer” as a “dark pastoral” among Stevens’s postwar works in which he “broods on the spiritual and cultural aftermath of war.”<sup>24</sup> This collection navigates a series of interconnected terrains with war as a

central coordinate within the poems' interwoven geographies of violence and relief.

It was between 1936 and 1947 that Stevens wrote and published the bulk of his (major) works: *Ideas of Order* (1936), *The Man With the Blue Guitar*, *Parts of a World*, and *Transport to Summer*. These years were marked by the build-up to, and the devastating events of, WWII and Stevens's collections in this period negotiate these facts as key determinants of reality in his poetic universe. But Stevens did not stop there: as 1947 was drawing to a close, he was already composing more poems that would be collected in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Indeed, that collection's title poem offers a daunting worldview in the wake of the nuclear aurorae created by the atomic detonations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thus, while Stevens is often read in relation to questions of abstraction, the seasons, and the power of the imagination, re-positioning the majority of his output in parallel with the brutalities and horrors of warfare allows for a range of other, potentially productive, interpretations. While actual conflict may have been held at a distance, the effects and aftermath of warfare are continuing parts of the Stevensian poetic world.

"Esthétique du Mal," a 346-line poem, was written over six weeks in 1944 in response to an American soldier's letter in the Spring 1944 edition of the *Kenyon Review*. The soldier had asked:

What *are* we after in poetry? Or, more exactly, what are we attempting to rout? The commandos of contemporary literature are having little to do with Eliot and even poets of charming distemper like Wallace Stevens (for whom we all developed considerable passion). Not necessarily a poetry of time and place, either. The question of poetry as in life (and in the Army) is one of survival... Men like Karl Shapiro (his "Anxiety," in *Chimera* recently, is notable), John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz transcend the aesthetic of poetry—thank God! I find the poetry in *Kenyon Review* lamentable in many ways because it is cut off from pain. It is intellectual and it is fine, but it never reveals muscle and nerve. It does not really matter whether poetry of men in war, or suffering the impact of communiqués, has a large or small "frame of reference." It must, I feel, promise survival for all who are worth retrieving—it must communicate a lot of existence; an overwhelming desire to go on...<sup>25</sup>

Stevens worked on what a response could be, noting in a letter to John Crowe Ransom in the middle of June 1944: "What particularly interested me was the letter from one of your correspondents about the relation between poetry and what he called pain. Whatever he may mean, it might be interesting to try to do an *esthétique du mal*. It is the kind of idea that is difficult to shake off."<sup>26</sup>

Stevens's poem initially works out from instances of pain as part of the human experience, either historically due to the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius, or more con-





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temporaneously in terms of the war in Europe, viewed from the perspective of the American soldier, in Naples, “writing letters home / And, between his letters, reading paragraphs / On the sublime.”<sup>27</sup> It balances evil as an entity both willed (by the human will and by abuse of power) as well as unwitting (the operations of the natural world know nothing of our existence and miseries) with what aesthetics can do as a response. Should there be, is there any division between aesthetics and ethics? Does poetry, or art more generally, have a moral role to play in our world?

Mount Vesuvius provides an ideal backdrop for Stevens’s enquiries, offering an immediate historical awareness of the potential for devastation. Vesuvius’s last major eruption came in March 1944, seven months after the allied invasion of Italy, and immediately before Stevens writes “Esthétique du Mal.” Prior to that, its major eruptions had come in 1872 and, of course, in A.D. 79 when its destructive lava flow destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum, killing an estimated 30,000 people. The 1944 eruption claimed twenty-six Italian civilian lives, displaced 12,000 more and also accounted for twenty-five million dollars’ worth of damage to US military bombers stationed in the town of Terzigno, on the eastern side of the mountain. So, Stevens’s poem opens in the aftermath of site-specific natural devastation set within a larger context of human devastation wrought by the now-five-year war. Stevens writes into the opening lines considerations of place (both home and away), warfare (both as generalized and location-specific phenomena), the potential for volcanic eruptions, thoughts on the sublime, and the distillation of pain as a constant, as an historic event in memory, and as the consummation of life:

He was at Naples writing letters home  
And, between his letters, reading paragraphs  
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned  
For a month. It was pleasant to be sitting there,  
With the sultriest fulgurations, flickering  
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe  
The terror of the sound because the sound  
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain  
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,  
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.  
The volcano trembled in another ether,  
As the body trembles at the end of life.<sup>28</sup>

A central fact of wartime, and existence more generally, for Stevens is suffering, and pain: “Pain is human,” we hear, and that “Life is a bitter aspic.”<sup>29</sup> Pain is a construction of the human experience, not of the natural world: “Vesuvius might consume/  
In solid fire the utmost earth and know/No pain.”<sup>30</sup> With humans taken out of the equation, deliberations of and comparisons of pain and suffering would be nullified.

Moreover, the world is indifferent to how we feel about it: “It is pain that is indifferent to the sky,” writes Stevens, who in section III posits the idea that it is Christianity that has created its own problems here by creating and believing in “an over-human god” who suffers as we suffer, sharing our mortal condition out of “sympathy.”<sup>31</sup>

If God as a concept is removed from our view of things, so too then must Satan be removed—good and evil are not impulses external to us, but part of us, and with “the phantoms . . . gone” as “shaken realist[s],” we see reality on its own terms.<sup>32</sup> In the face of this, and of the issues of evil and war in our lifetime, we must remember that a heaven elsewhere that we might desire is an unreal, “non-physical” idea where spirits yearn to be part of this world:

Perhaps,  
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,  
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe  
The green corn gleaming and experience  
The minor of what we feel.<sup>33</sup>

The lack we feel is one we ourselves have created by our failure to live, fully, in the world as it is, “Completely physical in a physical world.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed,

The greatest poverty is not to live  
In a physical world, to feel that one’s desire  
Is too difficult to tell from despair.<sup>35</sup>

For Stevens, an aesthetics of now would be true to that now, emphasizing the physical and not the metaphysical, yearn not for what is past or what might happen after death: these are both unknowable now in this world, mere descriptions without places. The world of this poem is one of current pain created by current people and needs a response to it from someone who can see the world as it is, for what it is—such “muscle and nerve” as demanded by the soldier correspondent will provide a route toward truth.

Turning to Bishop, her aesthetics of now in 1947, for the purposes of this analysis, are centered in “At the Fishhouses.” What she produces is a more textured and much more complexly interwoven awareness of the physical and metaphysical concerns than Stevens’s poem offers. Hers is at once familial, geographical, religiously inflected (by Christianity like Stevens’s poem), comical, and, ultimately, historical in its sweep of concerns which, initially, concentrate on fishhouses on a Nova Scotian shoreline. Pain features in the poem both as physical fact and as a metaphysical experience common to humans. Bishop’s very difficult childhood, well documented across Bishop criticism, was divided between both Nova Scotia and Massachusetts; a Guggenheim Fellowship in April 1947 allowed her to return to the former, the locale

of her maternal grandparents, one result of which is this particular poem, an apparently quite simplistic and straightforward narrative of a shoreline scene. Warfare is not even a vibration within the poem's immediate environments; indeed, it does not feature as a primary issue across her work, although another Massachusetts poem about familial and personal rupture, "In the Waiting Room" (1971), does have World War I as part of its textural backdrop. As far as WWII was concerned, Bishop did have first-hand experience of American military preparations for the conflicts in Asia and Europe: Key West, Florida (also a favorite haunt of Wallace Stevens), where Bishop was living in the fall and winter of 1941, was rapidly rearranged as a naval base to house fifteen thousand servicemen in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>36</sup> Given Bishop's career-long habit of working relatively slowly on a small number of collections, however, the immediacy of contemporary world events is not readily self-evident in her poetry. Indeed, writing to Anne Stevenson in March 1963, she remarks that "it is odd how I often feel myself to be a late-late Post World War I generation-member, rather than a member of the Post World War II generation. Perhaps the Key West years also had something to do with it."<sup>37</sup> Whatever the explanation, her writing generally, and "At the Fishhouses" in particular, speaks to transhistorical issues positioning poetry as the optimal access mode to knowledge and truth beyond the particular circumstances of the moment.

Readers familiar with Bishop will know that there is a lot to see and pay attention to in her poetry. "At the Fishhouses" is a particularly important example of a technique that emphasizes the importance of visual perception. How we see the world and what we see are two critical components in Bishop's work; there is arguably a certain symmetry to the fact that her wartime experience in Key West included a five-day stint working in the navy's "Optical Shop" "taking binoculars apart & putting them back together again."<sup>38</sup> Anne Stevenson, who produced the first critical study of Bishop, notes how Bishop "believed that what matters in art is 'seeing things.' She was a word painter, the look of things isolated her from the confessional craze."<sup>39</sup> A word painter, and a capable painter, Bishop was also keenly interested in cinema and the visual arts, and her long descriptive stanzas in "At the Fishhouses" produce an effect that is simultaneously forensic (in its care and attention to specific detail) and photographic (in its heightened visual awareness). Her technique insistently calls attention to itself as one technique that depends on looking, and then looking again. For example, the poem "The Monument" from her first collection *North & South* (1946) asks in its opening line "Now can you see the monument?"<sup>40</sup> Hence, the poem questions both what is seen and how it is seen. As Linda Anderson notes, not only did Bishop identify with the art of "the provisional"; her interest in "the more conceptual aspects of writing . . . and exploring the ways in which visibility is plural, subject to multiple points of view and encounters, challeng[ed] the limits of repre-

sentation.”<sup>41</sup> To take a closer look, which Bishop encourages readers to do continually, to pay attention to things as they are, their very materiality, their visual existence, and from this work toward what these things might possibly mean: these are the activities in which Bishop engages readers in “At the Fishhouses.”

What is seen in this poem? And what might any of it mean? In terms of factual detail, there are five fishhouses; an old man nets a fishing net; there are also wheelbarrows, a wooden capstan, gangplanks, Lucky Strike cigarettes, a seal; and, increasingly as the poem tells its narrative, water. Given that it is evening and the overpowering smell of codfish is so pervasive, seeing clearly is not immediately possible, though Bishop’s careful detailing of the old man, his vest covered in fish scales, his knife, and the “silver” sea allows readers to imagine that vision here has not been hampered by the gathering dusk or the fact that “The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water.”<sup>42</sup> Coming closely on the heels of the poem’s actually equivocal presentation of the visual—the sea is “opaque” and the silver that covers so much of the scene is “an apparent translucence”—are physical and then metaphysical interactions with the natural environments of this Nova Scotian fishing village. From out of the waters arises a seal to whom the poem’s speaker sings Baptist hymns, namely “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”; and, by dipping your hand into the waters, the speaker suggests that the sensation would be akin to burning (“your hand would burn”) because of the nature of this particular body of water which is likened to “a transmutation of fire.” The experience of this water that burns is one of pain; it is also “like what we imagine knowledge to be,” Bishop providing a run of adjectives (“dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free”) that multiply and consequently disperse the potential ways of accommodating such knowledge within language.<sup>43</sup> The poem closes drawing speaker and reader alike away from the specifics of herring and codfish, Lucky Strikes and Baptist hymns out into a consideration of how we know what it is we know. Given that “our knowledge is historical,” Bishop connects poem, poet and audience to an understanding of reality that transcends the present moment incorporating its specifics within the movements of history which, as Jameson famously instructs, “is what hurts.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, to recount this scene of a “gloaming almost invisible,” Bishop bridges the distance that opens between experience and the description of it with lists of adjectives and repeated items and phrases—herring, the herring boat, herring scales, Christmas trees that are “waiting for Christmas,” the seal returning “evening after evening,” and the water that is “flowing and drawn,” “flowing and flown”—thus providing readers with what we imagine is there, even if initial perception of it is obscured, opaque, uncertain.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike Stevens’s “Esthétique du Mal,” the guiding concern of this poem is not (the recent) war. Reading Bishop’s correspondence from during and after WWII, the war as a subject is singularly absent as an issue. Despite initial consternation at how Key

West was “terribly overcrowded and noisy . . . and not a bit like itself. It is one of those things one can’t resent, of course, because it’s all necessary,”<sup>46</sup> Bishop sidesteps the fact of the war and its aftermath to concentrate on other matters of immediate concern to her, whether that be travel to Mexico in 1942 or to Nova Scotia in 1946 and 1947; or the success of her own writing and that of her correspondents, in particular Marianne Moore and, from 1947, Robert Lowell. More recently, Lorrie Goldensohn has added to critical knowledge of Bishop’s thinking at the time of composition by concentrating on Bishop’s letters to her analyst Ruth Foster from February 1947. As a result, Goldensohn suggests that the source for “At the Fishhouses” was not the Nova Scotian setting that is detailed so meticulously in the poem but rather unconscious thoughts that Bishop admits to having about Foster. Bishop herself concluded that “knowledge is historical, besides being a random thought, I wrote down yrs ago also refers obviously to the process of psychoanalysis I know.”<sup>47</sup> In another letter, to U.T. and Joseph Summers in July 1955, Bishop claims that “[q]uite a few lines of ‘At the Fishhouses’ came to me in a dream, and the scene—which was real enough, I’d recently been there—but the old man and the conversation, etc., were all in a later dream.”<sup>48</sup> The Foster letters also reference a dream “in which everything was very wild & dark & stormy and you [Foster] were in it feeding me from your breast” and connect the appearance of the seal with Dr. Foster or, more accurately, Bishop’s unconscious perception of Dr. Foster.<sup>49</sup> The scene in Nova Scotia is, then, “real enough” but the poem’s narrative about the water, and particularly the seal, relocates readers into a parallel sphere where the unconscious reveals its power to imagine as well as produce what knowledge might be, whether painful or otherwise.

The difficulties of Bishop’s life, begun in infancy and carried into adulthood and which were demonstrated at one level by her issues with alcohol dependence, coalesce in “At the Fishhouses,” as the surface detail of the poem’s narrative gives way to increasingly submerged, and possibly surreal, meanings. For a poem that had initially appeared to offer certainty, further readings multiply its possible meanings, leaving us in an uncertain intermediate position between the poem and its ultimate Meaning. On this journey toward some sense of revelation, or at least re-formation of this specific scene, Bishop moves us along from the physical into the metaphysical, picking out and packing in a series of elements along the way. Particular to these are religious symbols: the Christmas trees, the “ancient wooden capstan” with its “melancholy stains, like dried blood,” the reference to “total immersion” and the (ironic?) singing of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in the 1955 letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers, Bishop notes that she “made the change about the hymn because ‘A Mighty Fortress’ isn’t sung by Baptists.”<sup>51</sup> Bishop, for one, would know this fact given that she was raised in both the Baptist and Presbyterian faiths

and could recite hymns well into adulthood.<sup>52</sup>

Why might Bishop have made this particular change? It occurs specifically in relation to the seal who, like the poem's speaker, is "a believer in total immersion."<sup>53</sup> The hymn in question was written by Martin Luther in 1529. Elsewhere in his writings (specifically his *De Captivitate* from 1520), he made the case for total immersion as a more accurate symbolic representation of the full theological import of baptism. Like the seal in Bishop's poem, Luther was obviously "interested in music."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, as a representation of his theological beliefs, while he was a professor at Wittenberg University, Luther designed a seal (a white rose encompassing a red heart containing a black cross) to visualize his belief in grace and the true faith. Writing to the Wittenberg town clerk, Herr Spengler, Luther described his design as follows:

The first thing expressed in my seal is a cross, black, with the heart, to put me in mind that faith in Christ crucified saves us. "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness."

Now, although the cross is black, mortified, and intended to cause pain, yet it does not change the colour of the heart, does not destroy nature—i.e., does not kill, but keeps alive. "For the just shall live by faith—by faith in the Saviour."

But this heart is fixed upon the centre of a white rose, to show that faith causes joy, consolation and peace. The rose is white, not red, because white is the ideal colour of all angels and blessed spirits.

This rose, moreover, is fixed in a sky-coloured ground, to denote that such joy of faith in the spirit is but an earnest and beginning of heavenly joy to come, as anticipated and held by hope, though not yet revealed.

And around this groundbase is a golden ring, to signify that such bliss in heaven is endless, and more precious than all joys and treasures, since gold is the best and most precious metal. Christ our dear Lord, He will give grace unto eternal life.<sup>55</sup>

Bishop makes a very deliberate change: to reference Luther's most famous hymn and for her speaker to sing it to a seal both reinforces Bishop's reputation for dry humor and clouds some of the claims of the Foster letters that the seal, for all intents and purposes, represents Ruth Foster. What is produced—whatever the balances between Freudian identification, biographical fact, and poetic imagining—is a confluence of imagery and symbolism within a poem that Bishop revised and redrafted at least seven times before publication. She aims for re-formation, if not (Lutheran) Reformation. The environment of the Nova Scotian fishhouses is aesthetically refigured as Bishop combines remembered details of a particular place with fragments of imagined scenarios and unconscious impulses. If the poem is a veiled discussion of psychoanalytic practice, as the Foster letters suggest, the fractured landscape of Bishop's biography offers itself as a set of difficult and at times traumatic circumstances. Although not a war poem, its closing movement offers

resolutions to complex situations and to pain; and not temporary or time-specific solutions, either. The knowledge with which the poem concludes is ongoing, extending into the future just as much as it has come to us from the past. Access to it is a risk, requiring pain. As the foregoing poem proceeds, it moves toward this recognition of the condition as well as the value of knowledge. “At the Fishhouses” follows a trajectory from the particular to a universal understanding of the self’s relation to the world; moreover, it navigates how an aesthetics of now might possibly enact their necessary offices when confronted with the most difficult of circumstances. Later, Bishop will connect history and a coming into self-consciousness in “In the Waiting Room” from *Geography III* (1976), her child speaker in that poem fainting in a dentist’s waiting room while reading the *National Geographic* and then entering a world where “The War was on” and it is “still the fifth/Of February, 1918.”<sup>56</sup> At that poem’s conclusion, while everything seems the same, everything (for the child) has changed as she emerges into the wartime winter evening as a newly self-conscious being. Knowledge has been attained that will not be relinquished, though it too is accompanied by “an oh! of pain.”<sup>57</sup>

The encounter with the seal in “At the Fishhouses” is as much a symbolic interruption as it is a recollection—referencing Bishop’s dual Baptist and Presbyterian upbringing, though she did not practice any religion in her daily adult life—on the path toward what we imagine knowledge to be. Such knowledge is not already fully available, nor containable; it is part of a larger sweep of historical accretion. To attempt to do it justice, for the purposes of the poem it must be imagined, but language can only find approximate comparisons for it: “It is like what we imagine knowledge to be,” this water that appears to be “a transmutation of fire.”<sup>58</sup> Bishop hence offers us an “historical awareness of another sort,” as Matthiessen referred to it in Salzburg, one month before Bishop’s poem was published in 1947. Matthiessen spoke of the promise, not anxiety, of an occasion in which historical awareness could permit the reconnection of the world’s peoples sundered by warfare. Bishop’s insertion into historical awareness is one that invites, indeed necessitates, pain: pain in the present, pain visceral at evening (to adapt a Stevens line). Pain is human; it is part of our knowledge of existence in this world. Yet, poetry, while recognizing this fact, incorporates it within a wider aesthetic frame capable of accommodating “All pleasures and all pains,” as Stevens registers it in one of his earliest poems, “Sunday Morning” from 1915, another work conceived during a time of European warfare.<sup>59</sup>

The portfolio of American studies over the last seventy years has been extended, indeed must continue to be extended, by very particular and insistently political issues that, in recent times, have followed each other in quick succession. To take some brief examples: the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman (later acquitted) on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, directly inspired the Black Lives

Matter movement; another murder, that of another unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, also by a police officer (Darren Wilson; not indicted), led to weeks of violent protests. The following year, on May 20, 2015, the African American Policy Forum, together with the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School and twenty associated sponsors, hosted the #SayHerName vigil in memory of black females who had died either in police custody or as a result of police officers discharging their firearms. The election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States was followed in January 2017 by the Women's March, most markedly in Washington, D.C., but also in other venues across the United States and around the world, in part to protest the new president's well-documented record of misogyny and multiple allegations of his sexual misconduct. In August 2017, a peaceful protest against an alt-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was rammed by a car driven by a neo-Nazi supporter resulting in the death of 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Also in 2017, starting in October, the #MeToo movement dominated social media in the wake of sexual abuse allegations by over eighty women against film producer Harvey Weinstein; the fact of Trump's presidency undoubtedly galvanized what rapidly became a global campaign calling out sexual misconduct. The almost instantaneous eruption of this movement—within twelve hours of a tweet by Alyssa Milano on October 15 that included #MeToo, the hashtag was used over 200,000 times; on Facebook, 4.7 million users used the hashtag in twelve million posts in the first twenty-four hours—signaled the extent of a sexual abuse pandemic across western society, and particularly the United States.<sup>60</sup> A toxic mix of domestic unrest unleashed by Trump's election victory combined with a set of international circumstances that would not have been anticipated just two or three years previously has ensured that the open ruptures within American society will continue to pour forth debates requiring urgent critical attention and discussion. Incidents of racial hatred, of right-wing extremism, and of abusive misogynistic sexism, dormant to varying degrees prior to Trump's election, have come to the surface of a nation increasingly riven by what the reality of his presidency means for America.

When in time to come, another seventy years, and more, the scholars of those generations look back to this particular moment, they will undoubtedly see a time of anxiety, of violence, and of protest overshadowing much that had previously offered promise. Whatever the outcomes of the current geopolitical travails, of the four (or possibly eight) years of a Trump White House, and of the evolution of the European Union in the wake of the debacle that is Brexit, our future colleagues, while scratching their heads at the legacies they have inherited, would also do well to remember Bishop's instruction that "knowledge is historical." Knowledge is part of the continuum of history. It is quite possible that the cycle of history through



which we currently pass is repeating a series of errors that culminated in the Second World War. The shift to the right, in America as well as European states in recent times, certainly augurs ill for the immediate present and the twenty-first century short-term. Yet, as Bishop's poetry highlights—allied to the fact that a significant volume of women are becoming politicized in response to Trump's presidency—this time will also pass and the historical knowledge of individuals, of a society, and of a nation will make itself heard. It is a process, both "flowing, and flown," that must not, that will not cease.

## Notes

- 1 An article based on Poole's talk is included in this issue: Ralph J. Poole, "Huck Finn at King Arthur's Court: F. O. Matthiessen, the Salzburg Seminar, and American Studies," *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v1i1.70>.
- 2 James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 236.
- 3 Charles Berger, "War," in *Wallace Stevens in Context*, ed. Glen Macleod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 263.
- 4 Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel," in *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 92.
- 5 Marianne Moore, "Poetry," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1951), 41.
- 6 Ashley Brown, "An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop," in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwatz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 294.
- 7 F. O. Matthiessen, "Wallace Stevens at 67," Review of *Transport to Summer* by Wallace Stevens, *The New York Times*, April 20, 1947, <https://movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/12/21/home/stevens-summer.html>.
- 8 F. O. Matthiessen, *From The Heart of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 13.
- 9 Stevens to Leonard C. van Geysel, Hartford, CT, September 20, 1939, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 342.
- 10 Stevens to Leonard C. van Geysel, Hartford, CT, January 18, 1940, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 353.
- 11 Stevens to Henry Church, Hartford, CT, August 23, 1940, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 364–5.
- 12 Matthiessen, "Wallace Stevens at 67."
- 13 Berger, "War," 261; Wallace Stevens, "The immense poetry of war . . .," in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 251.
- 14 Stevens, "The immense poetry," 251.
- 15 Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Routledge, 2005), 46; Wallace Stevens, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 452.
- 16 Stevens to John Crowe Ransom, Hartford, CT, July 28, 1944, in *Letters of Wallace Ste-*

- vens, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 469.
- 17 Stevens to Henry Church, Hartford, CT, August 31, 1944, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 472.
  - 18 Rachel Galvin, “‘Less Neatly Measured Common-Places’: Stevens’ Wartime Poetics,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 3, no. 1 (2013): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsj.2013.0004>.
  - 19 Stevens to van Geysel, September 20, 1939, 343; Wallace Stevens, “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 100–1.
  - 20 Berger, “War,” 259.
  - 21 Wallace Stevens, “Certain Phenomena of Sound,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 256.
  - 22 Wallace Stevens, “Holiday in Reality,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 276.
  - 23 Wallace Stevens, “Credences of Summer,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 322.
  - 24 Berger, “War,” 263, 259.
  - 25 Quoted in James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 238.
  - 26 Stevens to John Crowe Ransom, Hartford, CT, June 17, 1944, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, comp. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 468.
  - 27 Wallace Stevens, “Esthétique du Mal,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 277.
  - 28 Ibid.
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  - 30 Ibid., 277.
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  - 32 Ibid., 282.
  - 33 Ibid., 286.
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  - 35 Ibid.
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  - 37 Bishop to Anne Stevenson, Petrópolis, Brazil, March 20 (?), 1963, in *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2008), 846.
  - 38 Bishop to Marianne Moore, September 1, 1943, in *One Art: Letters*, sel. and ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 115.
  - 39 Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 274.
  - 40 Elizabeth Bishop, “The Monument,” in *Poems*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 25.
  - 41 Linda Anderson, *Elizabeth Bishop: Lines of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 3, 73.
  - 42 Elizabeth Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” in *Poems*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar,



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- Straus and Giroux, 2011), 62.
- 43 Ibid., 63–4.
- 44 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; New York: Routledge, 2002), 88.
- 45 Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” 62–4.
- 46 Bishop to Charlotte Russell, Key West, FL, December 28, 1941, in *One Art: Letters*, sel. and ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 104.
- 47 Lorrie Goldensohn, “Approaching Elizabeth Bishop’s Letter to Ruth Foster,” *The Yale Review* 103, no. 1 (2015): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/yrev.12210>.
- 48 Bishop to U.T. and Joseph Summers, Samambaia, July 18, 1955, in *One Art: Letters*, sel. and ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 308.
- 49 Goldensohn, “Approaching,” 10.
- 50 Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” 62–3.
- 51 Bishop to U.T. and Summers, July 18, 1955, 307.
- 52 See Elizabeth Bishop, “Influences,” *The American Poetry Review* 14, no. 1 (1985): 12–3.
- 53 Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” 63.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Quoted in Constance Berg, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Series III, Cycle C* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 2000), 146–7.
- 56 Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room,” in *Poems*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 181.
- 57 Ibid., 180.
- 58 Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” 63–4.
- 59 Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 54.
- 60 Rozina Sini, “How ‘Me Too’ is Exposing the Scale of Sexual Abuse,” *BBC News*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41633857>; Cassandra Santiago and Doug Criss, “An Activist, a Little Girl and the Heartbreaking Origin of ‘Me Too,’” *CNN*, October 17, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/17/us/me-too-tarana-burke-origin-trnd/index.html>.

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